

Iran: Identity and Insurrection

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Introduction

On January 16, 1979, Reza Shah Pahlavi boarded a plane and left Iran. The mobilization of nearly ten percent of the population had led to mass protests and demonstrations, precursors to the outbreak of revolution (Fatemi p. 48). The Shah never returned. Instead, a new government was erected and the nation was renamed the “Islamic Republic of Iran.” The success of the revolution in ousting the Shah has been contributed to many sources, including the Shah’s own westernization policies which alienated the masses (Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, p.60). However, the influence of one man is consistently regarded as a source of revolutionary fuel. The most influential figure of the revolution was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, known by his most adamant supporters as Imam Khomeini.¹

Educated in the religious sciences from a young age, Khomeini never strayed from the path of devotion. His studies led to a personal interest in philosophy, poetry and mystical Islam, interests which would surprise many unaware of his personal preferences (Moin pp. 28-29). At the end of his life, however, Khomeini would not be remembered by most for his skill in composition. By some, he would be hailed an icon of freedom, legitimate authority and divine approval. By others, including many who at one time believed he would be a solution to the hardships of the Iranian people, Khomeini would gain a title of infamy.

This analysis explores the Iranian communal identity and the facets thereof which Khomeini drew upon in his call for revolution. I will begin with an assessment of the diversity of

¹ “Imam” is a title given to religious leaders within the Muslim community. In Shia’ Islam, the title of Imam is generally reserved for leaders of the community who are believed to be divinely appointed and infallible. Although Ruhollah Khomeini’s official title is, in western translation, “Ayatollah,” his leaders grew to see him as a divinely appointed leader of Islam for the Iranian people, thereafter giving him the title of “Imam Khomeini.” It should be noted that this title differs significantly from that given to the twelve Imams of Twelver Shi’ism, prophesied of by the prophet Muhammad. In the case of the latter, these twelve Imams take on a role comparable to that of a Christian prophet in that they are believed to be representatives and messengers of God set apart for a divine purpose and mission.

Iran. The implications of such vast diversity will be reviewed through the examination of a communal identity, with a focus throughout this piece on the religious communities of Iran. Two specific elements of the Iranian communal identity will be the focus of this piece: the quest for justice and the significance of martyrdom.

Justice will be linked to the Iranian identity through a discussion of the roots of justice in Zoroastrianism and its development within the doctrine of Shia' Islam. The importance of Shia' Islam on the Iranian communal identity will also be examined. Additionally, the theme of justice within contemporary Iranian literature will be reviewed through poetry and prose. The novel which will be analyzed in this portion of the paper is Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun*, a prominent piece of contemporary Persian literature. In an effort to remain concise, the summary of the novel will be brief.

The presence of martyrdom in the Iranian communal identity will be discussed through an examination of martyrdom in the Shia' narrative. Specifically, the martyrdom of Imam Hossein will be considered as a defining element of Shia' theology. In addition to an analysis of martyrdom through religion, this second facet of the communal identity will be explored through historic and contemporary Iranian literature. Daneshvar's *Savushun* will provide evidence for the presence of martyrdom in contemporary Iranian art. In addition to *Savushun*, the story of "Siavash" from Abu I'Qasim Ferdowsi's *The Shahnameh*, or *The Book of Kings*, will be examined. The narratives of these stories will be considered in connection with the martyrdom of Imam Hossein.

To conclude the discussion of martyrdom in the Iranian communal identity, contemporary rituals related to martyrdom will be reviewed. These rituals will demonstrate the

impact the death of Imam Hossein has had on the Shia', and by extension, Iranian identity. These rituals will also offer insight into the persistence of the themes of justice and martyrdom in contemporary Iran.

I will thereafter assess Ayatollah Khomeini's efforts of mobilization and calls for a change in national leadership. The presence of justice and martyrdom as elements of Khomeini's message will be considered relying upon Khomeini's own speeches, in large part, to clarify his views. Within Khomeini's messages, the use of justice and martyrdom as fuels for revolution will be explored. Khomeini's ability to relate to his audience will be made clear through his understanding of the historical and religious elements which have helped to shape the communal identity of the Iranian people and the use of these elements in his calls for action.

[CHAPTER 1] IRANIAN IDENTITY

The Diverse Makeup of the Iranian Identity

Over the past four thousand years, the land now known as Iran has been home to millions of ethnically, culturally, religiously and socially diverse peoples (Amanolahi p. 37). It has known “occupation” under the rule of major empires, such as the Abbasids and Mongols, and later by Russian, British and American imperialists. The land has witnessed mass migration and has been a shelter for thousands of refugees during major world crises, with one of the largest refugee groups hailing from Afghanistan over the last decade (Rajaei p. 45). The ever changing landscape of Iran continues to establish the nation as an evolving center of diversity. Thus, it needs be that the determination of a shared Iranian identity begins with an examination of the wide range of contemporary settlers.

The complexities of Iranian identity start with the factor of ethnicity. Although the largest ethnic group is the Persians, several other ethnicities are represented. Second to the Persians in population size are Azeris at sixteen percent of the population, followed by Kurds, Lurs, Balochis, Arabs and Turkmans (Amanolahi pp. 39-40). The prevalence of ethnic diversity has led to the establishment of communities based largely on ethnicity. For example, throughout the northwestern corner of Iran, Azerbaijani communities are prevalent, whereas the Kordestan province is primarily home to individuals of Kurdish descent (Amanolahi p. 39). Also important to note when considering the diversity of communities in Iran is the presence of refugee neighborhoods. In particular, there has been a significant rise in the presence of Afghani and Arab refugees hailing from war-torn nations in recent years (UN Refugee Agency).² In light of

² According to the UN Refugee Agency, Iran is host to “one of the largest and most protracted refugee populations in the world.” The latest statistics hold that the number of registered refugees in Iran is just under one million. A majority of these refugees come from Afghanistan. There is also a significant refugee population hailing from Iraq.

all groups of contemporary settlers, recent figures place the Iranian population at just under eighty million, making Iran one of the most populated nations in the Middle East (United Nations).

A second element of identity, which will be of the utmost importance throughout this analysis, is that of religious association. Almost exclusively, with numbers at or above ninety-eight percent, the Iranian population identify as Muslims. Specifically, a majority of Iranians self-identify as followers of Shia' Islam (Amanolahi p.39). It should be noted that the statistics revealing religious affiliation say nothing to the degree of devotion exhibited by individuals within the Iranian society. From that perspective, personal religious preference can vary significantly from one individual to the next. Therefore, it should be maintained that religious association, especially in the case of a "theocracy," may for many be more of a title than an element shaping one's existence. While many Iranians may, in practice, fit the mold of a secularist, the impact of religion on contemporary Iranian culture, as will be examined throughout this piece, is clear. Thus, religion becomes a facet of identity even for the non-religious due to its presence in the public realm through celebrations, communal gatherings and popular literature.

Another facet of Iranian diversity, and one important to the makeup of both individual and communal identities, is that of language. Just over fifty-five percent of the population speaks Persian as their first language, the single official language of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Over ten separate languages follow Persian in number, ranging from Arabic to the Gilaki and Turkish dialects (Amanolahi p.39). Several scholars have devoted their research to studying the impact of

Most refugees live in urban areas, but economic sanctions against Iran and skyrocketing inflation rates have made it even more difficult for refugees to maintain a suitable standard of living. The UN is working alongside NGOs, such as Iranian Refugee Amnesty Network, to provide aid for refugees seeking to return to their home countries.

language upon the creation and maintenance of the Iranian identity. While the validity of these analyses is made clear through the quantitative and qualitative evidences of scholarly research, this analysis will not focus on language as an element of identity.

In addition to the necessary consideration of widespread diversity, it must be noted that the Iranian identity is not static. In her book, *Missing Persians*, Nasrin Rahimieh of the University of California, Irvine, describes the Iranian identity as a concept which “changes meaning and parameters over the course of time.” (p.2). Like the people of Iran who undergo cultural, religious and political transformations, so too does communal and shared identity experience continual evolution. While historical factors will be considered in the creation of contemporary Iranian identity, the core of this work will reflect Iranian identity throughout the twentieth century. That is not to say that certain elements of identity have not persisted through the ages; to the contrary, there are many elements, such as the Persian language, which have proved to withstand the test of time. Even these elements, however, have to some degree evolved within themselves and should not be considered unchanging facets of identity.

The Iranian Communal Identity

I will explore the Iranian communal identity primarily, though not exclusively, through the perspective of the religious, focusing on elements which create a sense of “oneness” amongst the Shia’ community. Ahmad Ashraf of Columbia University describes Iran’s national identity as influenced by religion in the following manner:

The traditional religious groups have advocated a primarily Islamic identity, viewing the Iranian nation as a segment of the “nation of Islam...” This Islamic-Iranian conception of Iranian identity represents an attempt at bridging the sacred and the secular, tradition and modernity... (p. 162).

In regards to the revolution the many Iranians sought, as Ashraf expressed, to bridge “...tradition and modernity.” Echoing this sentiment, French philosopher Michael Foucault “described the Iranian Revolution as ‘the first postmodern revolution of our time’” (Mirsepassi-Ashtiani p.51). The reality of this approach is particularly evident in an exploration of the resulting Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, ratified by ninety-eight percent of voters (Islamic Republic of Iran Constitution, Article 1). Whereas the Constitution does affirm the religious affiliation of the nation, that of an Islamic Republic, it also outlines the rights of the people as constituents to a republic model of government. An example of these rights as administered by the Constitution can be seen in Article Six, which states:

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of elections, including the election of the President, the representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the members of councils, or by means of referenda in matters specified in other articles of this Constitution (Islamic Republic of Iran Constitution).

Khomeini called not for a fundamental state, but for an Islamic Republic suited for eventual leadership under the Imam. As can be seen in the Article Six, the republic was designed to reflect the preferences of the people. Though Khomeini sought a return to “true” Islam, he spoke of the establishment of an entirely new, untested system of governance – a model like the Islamic Republic had not been known in the contemporary era in the Middle East (Khomeini p. 49). It is with the understanding of the revolution as a means of the establishment of a new, modern state that the fuels of change, rooted in the Iranian identity, will be examined.

Two elements of the Iranian identity which this analysis will explore are justice and the significance of martyrdom. In an examination of identity focused on the aforementioned shared factors a disclaimer is necessary: this analysis in no way attempts to provide an all-inclusive summation of the Iranian people. Even in a nation less diverse than Iran, attempting to do so

would be an impossible task. The strains which allow for an application of the term “oneness” may be few and far between. Therefore, the exploration of identity to follow is founded on an understanding that commonalities, even if applicable to most, will not apply to all. There are bound to be exceptions to every argument founded upon a qualitative observation of humankind. In this way, communal understanding must be accepted as shared elements of an identity much larger than that of the individual, with the realization that this analysis should not be applied to a singular person, but used to examine a group of peoples who share a common cultural experience. The focal group of this examination will be the religious communities of Shia’ Iran, adherents to the message of Ayatollah Khomeini. However, this piece will also discuss works of authors and social activists, such as Simin Daneshvar, whose works, while not manifestly religious, share a focus on the themes of justice and martyrdom.

The first facet of communal identity which will be explored is the significance of justice. In an attempt to understand the entrance of justice into the Iranian communal identity, an exploration of some of the roots of justice in Persian religious history is necessary. The following is an examination of the development of justice as a religious narrative, beginning with the creation story of Zoroastrianism, Iran’s most ancient religion.

[CHAPTER 2] The Concept of Justice in Iranian Religious History and Literature

The Roots of Justice in Iran

The conception of justice as a major tenant of Iranian identity can be traced to the early doctrines of Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest recorded faiths. Zoroastrian theology revolves around the deity of creation and wisdom, Ahura Mazda, and his opposition, Ahriman. According to believers, Ahura Mazda created the earth, elements and mankind. The entirety of creation was manifest following a series of seven singular events: the conception of sky, water, earth, plants, animals, man and visible fire. Ahriman did not aid in the Ahura Mazda's creation process but instead took on the role of the deity of destruction and hostility (Moore pp. 199-203). Here, the battle between good and evil as a central religious narrative is born. For much of the good that Ahura Mazda created, Ahriman developed an evil counterpart. For example, he brought illness and death into the world, thus allowing for and causing the suffering of mankind. As the deity of all that is good, Ahura Mazda is not "the author of anything evil..." and therefore all that is evil and all that brings suffering is attributed to Ahriman (Moore p. 203).

Until the final battle, when Ahura Mazda returns and defeats Ahriman definitively, the good of the world must suffer the evils espoused by the destructive deity. Thus, according to the Zoroastrian narrative, it is only when Ahriman is defeated that good will prevail over evil (Moore p. 180). The wait for the final battle can be considered a defining element within the Zoroastrian quest for justice—the outcome of this battle is decided. As believers of the Zoroastrian faith understand that in the final war, good will rise triumphant, followers need not worry about the state of the earth following Ahura Mazda's return. Justice will be restored when Ahura Mazda returns the world to a state of order and rids all evil from the earth (Moore p. 180).

However, until the final battle occurs, evil will continue to permeate the earth. Because of this, the struggle for earthly justice remains very much alive until the restoration of complete justice.

It should be noted that justice, as a religious as well as social concept, is evident only in light of the existence of opposition. If injustice were absent from humanity, so too would human understanding of justice be lost. In Zoroastrian theology, Ahura Mazda can be viewed as a divine manifestation of complete righteousness, and thus, absolute justice. On the contrary, Ahriman represents the opposing force of injustice. Because Ahriman brought injustice into the world, justice cannot be completely realized until he is defeated in the final battle by Ahura Mazda (Moore pp. 203, 224). Like the Zoroastrian theology, later religions developed an acute understanding of the war between good and evil and the journey to justice.³

The struggle between good and evil as a theological ideology has persisted through the ages. Judaism, Christianity and Islam welcomed the doctrine of this moral conflict as a core principle of humanity (Encyclopedia Britannica). With the passage of time, the understanding of the war between good and evil materialized. Some religious sects took this doctrine quite literally while others considered the war to be an internal contestation. In the case of Islam, this concept can be discussed in light of the doctrine of Jihad, or “The Struggle” (Encyclopedia Iranica). The doctrine of Jihad has come to be one of the most misunderstood, and in some cases, manipulated elements of Islamic theology. Whereas the Western media at large portrays the doctrine of Jihad as an exclusively physical battle—for example, referencing Jihad exclusively as a call to warfare—the prophet Muhammad offers a different explanation (Mohammad p.87).

According to sources of hadith noted in *The History of Baghdad*, compiled by a man known as

³ Concepts of justice were not only developed and maintained in the religious sector, though such is the focus of this analysis. Dating back to Ancient Mesopotamia, an ideology known as the “Circle of Justice” can be found. As described by Al-Ghazali, Persian theologian and jurist, the “Circle of justice” establishes the state as a system of social justice, wherein the king, legitimate or not, must act justly toward his people and soldiers (Al-Ghazali).

Kitab al-Baghdadi, the prophet Muhammad referred to Jihad as having two components: one being lesser, the other greater. The lesser Jihad, as noted by the prophet Muhammad, can be considered the physical manifestation of the war between good and evil. On the other hand, the greater Jihad signifies the individual's internal struggle against sin, temptation and unworthy pursuits (Kitab al-Baghdadi vol. 13, pp. 493-523). It is the maintenance of a righteous soul that constitutes the most important struggle in one's life, a concept made evident through the title attributed to this type of struggle as being "the greater."

The description of the greater Jihad indicates that one's individual battle against sin is a lifelong pursuit. Thus, there exists within this doctrine an implication of long-suffering. The individual must constantly fight to ward off evil or impurity within, even in the face of hardship. Similar to the teachings of Zoroastrianism, as well as Christianity and Judaism, Islam also declares that there will be an end to the struggle in which good triumphs over evil. Specific beliefs regarding this end differ within the various sects of Islam (Encyclopedia Iranica). It is with an understanding of the doctrine of the end of times and the significant consequences of martyrdom that the importance of justice in Shia' Islam is made manifest.

Justice in Twelver Shia' Theology

The majority of Iranian Muslims identify as Twelver Shias. This branch of Islam obtains its name from a belief in a series of twelve Imams following the death of the prophet Muhammad, all of which were direct descendants of the prophet. In Twelver theology, the last Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, went into hiding following the death of his father. It is believed that he did not die, but rather "is hidden in a state of occultation, or noncorporeal existence" until

an unknown time when he is expected to return and “usher in a reign of justice...in a world full of...injustice” (Bhagat pp. 31-32).⁴

For Twelver Shias, the wait for Mahdi’s return can be considered synonymous with the wait for the restoration of complete justice; as the twelfth Imam will return with the purpose of “saving the world” from evil, suffering, and sin it is clear that, according to Twelver Shia’ theology, suffering will remain in the world until Mahdi makes himself known again (Encyclopedia Iranica). Hence, Mahdi’s awaited arrival beckons in a return to absolute justice on the earth. This concept of justice within Shia’ theology, and Twelver Shia’ doctrine in particular, has become a core component of the faith. In addition to the five pillars of Islam recognized by both the Sunni and Shia’ community, Shias believe in two “Principles of the School”: the sacred nature of Imams and divine justice (Encyclopedia Iranica). These principles serve as core tenants of the faith, in line with *tawhīd*, or “The Oneness of God,” and “*ma’ād*,” doctrines of the hereafter, when it comes to level of importance (Subhani pp. 48, 96). This concept of divine justice, or *Adl*, operates in practice as “an acceptance that Allah is fair” and will not only uphold justice but punish those who commit injustices (Richter p.7). The addition of the two “Principles of the School” to Shia’ Islamic theology, and the continual observance in the contemporary era of the two principles, demonstrates the significance of these doctrines within the majority religious community of Iran. No additional doctrines have been considered “Principles of the School” nor have any other doctrines gained significance comparable to the original five pillars of Islam (Encyclopedia Iranica).

⁴ It is believed that Mahdi, or the Hidden Imam, will return to the world to establish lasting justice. He will come with his main helper, Jesus, Savior of the Christian world, at a time that is unknown to mankind. It is believed that there will be several signs proceeding the return of Mahdi, including an outbreak of turmoil, war and massacre and the revealing of “a mountain of gold,” disclosed by the Euphrates river (Inter-Islam).

As a major tenant of Twelver Shi'ism, justice has come to gain both a communal and individualistic meaning. On the one hand, the restoration of complete justice is viewed as an end to the suffering of the world, and all believers, through the triumph of good and the return of Mahdi. On the other hand, there exists the belief that because good has not yet conquered evil, followers of Allah will continually fall victim to the injustices of the world on a personal level. As injustice will prevail until the Imam's return, believers have an individual duty to fight off evil and injustice, evident, for example, in the existence of sin and persecution, made clear through the doctrine of the lesser Jihad. I will explore Khomeini's attribution of injustices to Reza Shah Pahlavi as a theme within his speeches and lectures, wherein the Ayatollah draws on religious understanding of the doctrine of justice.

Islam within Iranian Politics

In order to evaluate justice as a symbol used by Khomeini to encourage mobilization through religious dialogue, it is first necessary to examine the role of religion within Iranian politics. The presence of Islam within the contemporary political sector of Iran is founded upon religious-political relations established during the prime years of Zoroastrianism. During the Sasanian Empire the influence of Zoroastrianism in politics was especially far reaching. Historian Ann Lambton described the link between the faith and governing powers of the Sasanian Empire as being so closely linked "that the collapse of one meant the downfall of another" (p. 97). In effect, the king stood as the representative of Ahura Mazda on the earth and was expected to uphold the justice and demonstrate wisdom on earth; he was considered a legitimate ruler, a perception founded in the claim of divine approval (Lambton pp. 97-98). The religious influence on the social and political order was so strong, that, as asserted by R.C. Zaehner of Oxford University, "the social organism was co-terminous with the Good Religion,

and the two could not be separated” (p. 284). The link between the Sasanian Empire as a political and social unit and Zoroastrianism as a religious entity laid the foundation for the role Islam would fill in contemporary Iran.

With the rise of the Safavid Empire in 1501 A.D. Shia’ Islam was declared the state religion. Conversion to Shi’ism was made mandatory, eventually establishing a widespread change in the religious identity of the empire (Stearns and Langer p. 360). Like the Zoroastrian faith under the Sasanian Empire, the importance of religion under the Safavids is evident: the proclamation of the empire as a Shia’ state and forced conversion shed light on the priority given to the establishment of a communal religious identity. During the reign of the Qajar dynasty, Shia’ Islam maintained a prominent position, particularly through the role of the ulama (Hairi pp. 272-273). However, during this time clashes between ulama and the state occurred as a consequence to the rising power of the ulama in relation to the Qajar Shahs.⁵

According to Nikki Keddie of the University of California, Los Angeles, the ulama began to openly question the legitimacy of political rulers toward the end of the Safavid Empire and into the period of the Qajar Dynasty. Keddie states:

The ulama’s appeal was rather in the respect in which they were held by the community, their control of key institutions like the schools and courts, and in their ideological agreement with the majority of Iranians. They were far more respected than secular rulers, and when they dared point out that the Qajar rulers were selling Iran and Islam to foreign infidels, their appeals were paralleled by the urban population (pp. 310-311).

⁵ One of the greatest evidences of the power of the ulama during this period is found in the Tobacco Protest of 1890. Following Nasir al-Din Shah’s major concession of tobacco to Western powers, Shia’ ulama orchestrated a mass boycott of tobacco products in protest. The boycott was sparked with the public denouncement of tobacco product usage by Iran’s Grand Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi. Sources indicate Mirza Shirazi declared the use of tobacco to be a war “against the Hidden Imam” (Blarashk). The impact of the protest was profound, ultimately leading to the demise of the Shah’s concession.

The significant role of Shia' ulama was maintained throughout the twentieth century, although attempts to limit the power of the ulama were present. For instance, Reza Khan, the first Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, attempted to eliminate elements of Shia' Iranian identity through the creation of restrictive policies. One such policy prohibited the wearing of the hijab by public school teachers in the classroom (Abrahamian pp. 93-94). Known for his attempts at westernization, Reza Khan's pro-western policies alienated not only the ulama but the religious masses, a consequence which can be contributed in part to his policies limiting religious expression of the individual. These policies which attempted to "curb the power of the ulama," included public denouncement of religious tradition, such as sacred clothing, heavy state support of secular courts and "introducing secular education and government supervision of religious schools," moves which contributed to the "alienation of the ulama" (Ruthven p. 93).

When Reza Khan's son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, took his seat on the throne, the marginalization of the ulama continued. Rising resentment for the Shah and his policies of westernization as well as secularization increasingly turned the people away from the monarchy (Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, p.61). As noted by Ali Mirsepassi-Ashtiani of New York University, this resentment for the Shah and his policies was not limited to one group.

The crisis of cultural identity and sense of alienation were not confined to urban social groups. Various sectors of society-youth, women, the professional middle class, and intellectuals-experienced some form of dislocation as a result of the rapid transformation of Iranian society under the Shah. They, too, voiced their feelings of resentment and frustration with the political system (p. 60).

Thus it is clear that by the time Khomeini's public denouncements of the Shah began, advocates of change could be found in various social circles: from secular intellectuals to devote Shia'. Spreading the message of a government far different from the Shah's, Khomeini was seen

as a viable vehicle for change (Mirsepassi-Ashtiani p. 67). The Shah's choice to exile Khomeini when the Ayatollah began to condemn the government speaks to the power Khomeini had secured more than a decade before the revolution and also to the Shah's perceptions of the Ayatollah's capabilities. The Shah of Iran could have permanently disposed of Khomeini had he considered the Ayatollah a significant threat to his power. However, he did not. According to Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, treatment of the ulama, including Ayatollah Khomeini, indicates that "SAVAK [and the Iranian government] did not take the Islamic challenge seriously" (p. 81).

From the establishment of the Safavid Empire to the contemporary time, Shia' Islam has maintained a presence within Iranian politics. Eventually, as noted by Keddie, ulama began to speak out against national leaders, gaining a voice in the political realm as well as rising respect from Iranians frustrated with their current regime. Ayatollah Khomeini's views on the interweaving of religion and politics can be considered somewhat innovative for his time (Keddie p. 595).⁶ Khomeini believed in the need for a political, governing state founded upon Islamic values: he proclaimed that politics could only be administered and maintained in a just manner if the root of doctrine was Islamic jurisprudence and theological understanding. This view can be seen in the following excerpt from a speech preceding the revolution:

The only government that reason accepts as legitimate and welcomes freely and happily is the government of God, Whose every act is just and Whose right it is to rule over the whole world and all the particles of existence (Khomeini p. 170).

⁶ Although not particularly common, select twentieth-century Muslim scholars pushed for the interweaving of Islam and politics. One of the most important scholars in this discourse is Ali Shari'ati. Shari'ati is considered to have had a significant impact upon intellectuals leading up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. He taught that "Shi'iah, as a political movement, is the true expressions of the teachings of Islam," and that "Personal sacrifice, 'martyrdom,' and a permanent struggle are crucial" (Ismael and Ismael, p. 609). Shari'ati's ideologies stand alongside many of Khomeini's teachings and have undeniably played a role in the development of intellectualism leading up to the revolution. The ideologies of Islam as a political movement ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, while the important role of martyrdom is a main portion of this analysis.

Khomeini's message indicates that a government which is not "of God" is not legitimate. The Ayatollah's belief that Islam would be the means through which the most legitimate form of government was constructed explains his call for the creation of an Islamic Republic. Given the growing public dissatisfaction in national leadership under the Shah, Khomeini's suggestions for a new mode of government were in a position to be well-received.

The narrative of justice was not limited to religious theology. In the years leading up to and following the Iranian revolution, justice was a theme of some of the most prominent pieces of poetry and literature published by Iranians. In the next few pages, I will examine two pieces of written art which share a theme of justice, tying the works to the larger call for change.

Justice as a Literary Theme

Those familiar with the Iranian Revolution of 1979 are familiar with the remarkable poetry of the time. Perhaps one of the most famous poems of the time, written following the ousting of the Shah, is the lyrical piece, "Hamrah Sho Aziz." Written by Samila Ebrahimi and translated by Saeed Honarmand, this poem turned to song references the injustice manifest in the suffering of the Iranian people.

Join us, friend!
Join us, friend!
Don't stay alone in pain,
Because this shared pain
Will never be remedied
Divided, divided.

The difficulties of life
for us
The difficulties of life
for us
Without a joint struggle
Never will become easy.

Don't stay alone in pain!
Join us, friend!
Join us!
Join us!
Join us, friend!
Join us, friend!
Don't stay alone in pain,
Because this shared pain
Will never be remedied
Divided, divided.

The difficulties of life
for us
The difficulties of life
for us
Without a joint struggle
Never will become easy

The poem describes a communal suffering and makes a direct appeal for action in the cause of justice: “Join us, friend!” There exists within this piece an implicit understanding that everyone is suffering from the injustice of the times; the universality of this piece makes clear the claim that no one is free from the reach of evil. The words of the poem invoke a sense of community among the readers, referencing an element of a shared identity which the author asserts exists. Although the implication, that all are suffering together from injustice, is clear, hope remains that this injustice can be terminated. The piece does not end with the contention that the difficulties of injustice “will never become easy.” Rather, it is asserted that these difficulties *can* be made easy “with a joint struggle.” The changeable nature of the injustices the Iranian people are suffering, according to the poem, mark this type of injustice as, at least in part, temporal. Because the struggle against injustice will find no resolution on the universal scale until the return of the hidden Imam, it must be understood that the notion of justice represented in this piece refers most prominently to a type of injustice which can in fact be remedied. Thus, this piece suggests that for the Iranian people there is a way out of their troubles.

The troubles, or injustices, referenced throughout “Hamrah Sho Aziz” are not unique to the poem. In fact, the 1960s and ‘70s saw a focus on the themes of justice and progression within literature. Simin Daneshvar’s novel, *Savushun* contains as a major theme the prevalence of injustice in the world and the consequences thereof. Written in 1969 amid the revolutionary fervor, *Savushun* can be seen as a reference to and symbol of the significant nature of justice in pre-revolution Iranian society. *Savushun* follows a Shirazi couple, Zari and her husband, Yusof, at the close of the Second World War. Russian and British occupation of Iran ignites new tensions within the nation. While select Iranians welcome the occupation, seeing it as means of growth for the Iranian economy through foreign intervention, Yusof stands as an adamant source of opposition. He sees the occupation and, in effect, progressive westernization of Iran, as an oppressor of the Iranian people, accusing supporters of the imperialists, even dear friends of his, as forsaking the nation and “milking peasants” for their profit (Daneshvar p. 61). Yusof refuses to let the tribal groups in his community perish due to a lack of supplies, which are now being sent to foreign troops. He is committed to justice on the individual level, distributing food and supplies to dozens of local families (Daneshvar p. 75). Throughout the novel, Yusof can be seen as a symbol of persisting justice in his community.

The parallelism between the Iran of *Savushun* and the pre-revolutionary nation is drawn, in one respect, with the concept of occupation. Although physical occupation by armed forces was not present, Iran was occupied by western ideologies and agendas nonetheless. This type of occupation invokes in Yusof the sensation of being alienated in one’s own nation, a feeling which many advocates of political and social change felt in the years leading up to revolution (Mirsepassi-Ashtiani p. 60).

At its core, *Savushun* is a novel about justice. Kamran Talattof of the University of Arizona describes *Savushun* as a piece falling into the category of “committed” or politically and socially motivated literature. As expressed by Talattof, “committed literature...refers to the works of writers who dedicate themselves to the advocacy of certain beliefs, especially those related to political and ideological efforts to bring about social reform.” (Talattof p.4). He goes on to discuss the role women, like Daneshvar, played in the movement of “committed literature,” noting that during this time women moved away from a focus on gender issues to explore social change on the national level (Talattof p.4). *Savushun*, as a reflection of the injustices of the westernization of Iran under Reza Shah Pahlavi, can be considered a symbol of anticipated freedom. The longing that Yusof, in particular, demonstrates for the return of Iran to her people reflects the longing present in many intellectuals and later religious Iranians during the second half of the twentieth century.

Talattof describes *Savushun* as a novel of social activism, in his piece “Iranian Women’s Literature,” stating:

The heroes of *Savushun* take all the steps necessary to accomplish their most honorable goal: helping the movement. In this novel, too, personal interests, religion, love, family, and life in general are all secondary to the importance of one's social and political responsibilities. Life and the movement are linked only through death, and death itself becomes another subject of praise. The figurative expression of this devotion to the social movement and the glorification of heroism and martyrdom is the constitutive element of the language system in Danishvar's *Savushun*. (p. 535).

While, as Talattof suggests, religion is “secondary to the importance of one’s social and political responsibilities” in *Savushun*, the presence of the themes of justice and martyrdom link the novel with the religious movement of the revolution. Additionally, the Iranian Revolution was not only one of religious change. As was discussed through an examination of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the consequences of the revolution were not only religious but also

social and political. Daneshvar's novel sheds light on a growing social movement among intellectuals which would eventually contribute to the outbreak of revolution (Salehi pp. 2-3).

Like justice, the concept of martyrdom was a notable element of discourses in the growing social and religious movements preceding the revolution. The presence of martyrdom in both religious and literary circles is apparent in an examination of the roots of martyrdom in Iranian culture and society. The next portion of this analysis will focus on martyrdom in Shia' Islam and the impact of the martyrdom of Imam Hossein on Persian literature and contemporary rituals, elements contributing to the shaping of a communal identity.

[CHAPTER 3] The Concept of Martyrdom in Iranian Religious History, Literature and Contemporary Ritual

The Roots of Martyrdom in Iran

Unlike the theme of justice, the significance of martyrdom does not appear as a core component of Zoroaster's teachings. It is, therefore, with the rise of Islam, and most specifically Shia' Islam, that the concept of martyrdom penetrates the Iranian religious community.

Certainly, a primary source to examine when exploring martyrdom in Islamic theology is the words of the prophet Muhammad. According to a hadith compiled by Muhammad al-Bukhari, the prophet Muhammad made reference to the role of martyrdom in religious observance. The hadith reads as follows:

[53] The Prophet said, "Nobody who dies and finds good from Allah (in the Hereafter) would wish to come back to this world even if he was given the whole world and whatever is in it, except the martyr who, on seeing the superiority of martyrdom, would like to come back to the world and get killed again (in Allah's Cause)"

[54]...by Him in Whose Hands my life is! I would love to be martyred in Allah's Cause and then get resurrected and then get martyred, and then get resurrected again and then get martyred and then get resurrected again and then get martyred (Sahih al-Bukhari 4:52:53-54)

The statements above depict the eternal rewards awaiting those who lose their lives defending the cause of Allah. The prophet Muhammad describes a paradise at hand for these martyrs, one which is far superior to all other rewards granted in the afterlife. The eternal recompense awaiting the martyr is so grand, in fact, that the prophet himself declares he would act as a martyr for the faith time and time again. However, it is important to note that the prophet does not make a call for believers to seek martyrdom; he does not insist upon his followers

losing their lives in such a matter, but rather speaks in a general sense about the eternal consequences attributed to those who will ultimately lose their life.⁷

Although some claim that martyrdom is referenced in the Qur'an, defending such a claim is not an easy task. The verses usually pointed to as references of martyrdom generally mention a loss of life in defense of Islam, but at least in the case of the untrained reader, are not explicit in meaning. The following is a scripture most commonly associated with martyrdom by the general public:

And never think of those who have been killed in the cause of Allah as dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, receiving provision...(Qur'an 3:169, Sahih International Translation).

Losing one's life for the "cause of Allah" is referenced in the verse above. However, this verse does not attempt to persuade believers to become martyrs nor does it offer an explanation for precisely what constitutes death in the name of Allah and what does not. Such an explanation, in fact, is not found within the Qur'an, nor does any verse call for believers to ensure the loss of their lives as martyrs. The somewhat inexplicit phrasing of the Qur'an, coupled with a diversity of audience, has led to the creation of a wide variety of explanation and interpretation (Ezzati p. 1). Adding further to the complexity of dissecting the role of martyrdom as laid out in the Qur'an are complications with translation. As a particularly significant example, the word for martyr, *shahīd*, derives from the Arabic word *shahāda*, meaning 'witness,' and this is this definition that is most often used in Qur'anic translation. The definition of a *shahīd*, as a witness of the faith,

⁷ Here, it is important to take a step back and consider the subject of the prophet's message. During the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad his followers were heavily persecuted and many were killed. Many resisted Islam as a faith which rejected the long-held religious traditions, such as the belief in polytheism. Given the immense persecution that the followers of the prophet were constantly facing, it is likely that these verses make reference most specifically to those who died while following the faith during the prophet's lifetime. In recent years, martyrdom has become a method utilized by *extremists* to take the lives of others, hoping for and believing in an eternal reward. Recognition of extremists beliefs as compared to the beliefs of the Muslim community in general is, thus, most necessary.

has transformed over the years to also incorporate the role of martyrdom, in that one who dies defending the cause of Islam loses their life as a witness to the faith (Ezzati pp. 1-3). Evolution of translation and differences in interpretation should, therefore, be taken into account when examining the role of martyrdom in the Qur'an.

As the above records of the Qur'an and hadith suggest, martyrdom was present with the rise of Islam, though the context of such is not necessarily clear. Many followers of the prophet were killed for refusing to defy their faith and standing in defense of their beliefs ("Early Converts to Islam" p.4). Documented within *The Life of Muhammad*, a translation of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah* is the story of the first martyr of Islam, a slave woman by the name of Sumayyah bint Khayyat. Although little is known about Sumayyah, it is believed that she was killed by her master after refusing to abandon her newfound belief. Distressed by her death, and the persecution of many of his followers, the prophet Muhammad spoke comfort through a hadith, saying "patience oh family of Yasir, for you are destined for paradise" (Guillaume p. 145). Persecution toward followers of Muhammad continued throughout his lifetime and persisted even after his death with contemporary times proving to be no exception.

One of the most well known accounts of martyrdom in Persian literature is found in Abu I'Qasim Ferdowsi's tale of "Siavash," a story within the epic of *The Shahnameh*. Siavash is depicted by Ferdowsi as an ideal man, having been taught from a young age "what wise speech is," as well as what "justice and injustice are" (Ferdowsi p.217). When Siavash has proved a capable and ready leader, he leaves his life of training and is presented to King Kavus, his father. Although Siavash is welcomed by his father, his time at court is not without issue. His stepmother, Sudabeh, acts as a temptress, encouraging Siavash to be her lover. In response to her request Siavash proclaimed, "God forbid I should lose my head for the sake of my heart, or ever

be so disloyal to my father as to forget all...wisdom” (Ferdowsi p. 222). Even though Siavash rejects the advances of Sudabeh he continues to suffer as a result of the injustices of the world, personified largely by Sudabeh, who falsely accuses him repeatedly. After one such false accusation, Siavash is forced to ride on his horse through fire. His innocence is proven when he emerges “unscathed,” an act which causes “nobles and commoners” to rejoice and pass “on the news to one another that God justified the innocent” (Ferdowsi p. 217).

In an effort to be rid of the troubles caused by Sudabeh, Siavash leaves his father’s home and becomes a soldier. Unwilling to submit to the inhumane charges of his father -who orders mass executions and goes back on his word during wartime- Siavash relocates to the land of Turan where he finds temporary happiness (Ferdowsi pp. 228-270). In the end of the story, Siavash is killed by Turanian leaders jealous of his success in the land. Siavash’s death is followed by immediate darkness which “obscured the sun and moon” (Ferdowsi pp. 272-273). Ferdowsi writes of the reality of injustice in the act of this execution:

I turn to right and left, in all the earth
I see no signs of justice, sense, or worth:
A man does evil deeds, and all his days
Are filled with luck and universal praise;
Another’s good in all he does—he dies
A wretched, broken man... (p. 273)

In Ferdowsi’s description of Siavash’s death, the link between injustice and martyrdom as established within the Persian literary narrative can be seen.⁸ Although he lived an ideal life,

⁸ Ferdowsi explains that a “green tree sprang up” from the place “Siavash’s blood had been spilt” (p. 279). The image of a plant growing from earth soaked with the blood of a martyr remains alive in Shia’ legend. In the graveyards of Iran, headstones of the martyrs can be identified with the presence of a red tulip. As the Shia’ legends goes, a red tulip will sprout from ground soaked in the blood of a martyr. The image of the red tulip has become a symbol for mourning as well as committed remembrance to the cause for which the martyr perished. Some believe

“good in all he does,” Siavash suffered the consequences brought about by a lack of justice upon the earth. He becomes a martyr in that he died, “an innocent man,” one who others have “seen no sin” in—including his enemies (Ferdowsi pp. 271-272). Like Siavash, Shia’ Muslims recognize many martyrs who are believed to have died in innocence: the most well-known being the Prophet Muhammad. Perhaps the most respected and mourned martyr in Shia’ Islam, save Muhammad himself, is Imam Hossein. The narrative of his life and martyrdom are important components to contemporary ritual remembrance of the Imam, as will be discussed in this piece.

The Life and Martyrdom of Imam Hossein

The prophet Muhammad left no instructions for the selection of his successor. Following his death the Muslim community was torn as to whom lawfully, and legitimately, should be the next leader of the faith. The first caliph following Muhammad’s death, Abu Bakr, was nominated by a group of his peers. Abu Bakr appointed the second caliph, Umar. The third caliph, Uthman, was chosen by a “consultative council,” and following his death, the prophet Muhammad’s son-in-law and cousin, Ali, gained the title of caliph (Ismael and Ismael p.602). Thus it is apparent that even immediately after the prophet’s death there was division amongst believers as to how a leader should be chosen. The selection of the first caliphs following led to a great schism in the Muslim community. Many believed that leaders of the faith should be elected to their position by their peers while others felt only direct descendants of the prophet Muhammad were worthy and eligible for the post. Disputes over relative closeness to the prophet increased the subjectivity of the debate, which only led to the widening of the gap between followers. Eventually, the disagreements and tension which rose within the caliphate debate led to the outbreak of civil war.

that the word “Allah” as written on the Iranian flag is even formatted to mirror a red tulip as a sign of the centrality of martyrdom to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Moezzi).

The Muslim community, which under Muhammad had sprouted and grown as a unified body, was divided into two groups: the Sunni and the Shia' (Melton pp. 2610-2611).

The divide between the Sunni and Shia' heightened in the years following the death of Ali. As the branches grew apart, they began to solidify their religious, political and social identities. One of the most defining moments in the creation of Shia' identity can be traced to the desert city of Karbala (Nakash pp. 161-165). The incident, which has since been known as The Battle of Karbala, resulted in the martyrdom of Imam Hossein, one of the most prominent and historic leaders of the Shiite community.

Hossein ibn Ali was born in the year 626 A.D. to Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad, and her husband, Ali, who is considered the first Imam of Shia' Islam. It is said that the prophet Muhammad held the newborn child and prophesized that Hossein "...will achieve martyrdom..." adding that "...God will create a nation who will mourn Hossein until the Day of Judgment" ("The Third Imam" p.1). Naturally, his birth as a descendant of the prophet placed him in a special spiritual position. The prophet Muhammad is believed to have told Muslims to remember Hossein and his example long before Hossein's actions would prove significant to the faith, and to have taken Hossein, in his childhood, to places of worship ("The Third Imam" p.2). Thus even as a child, the future Imam was singled out as one who would give his life in defense of Islam.

Political unrest accompanied Hossein's growth and development and as a young adult he avoided heavy interactions with government turmoil. Instead, Hossein spent his time speaking the message of, what he considered to be, true Islam and serving the impoverished in Medina ("The Third Imam" pp. 1-2). When the third caliph passed and Ali gained the position of

caliphate, political turmoil turned to warfare. For what is believed to have been the first time in his life, Hossein served as a commander in the military during the Battle of Jamal, defending his father's position as legitimate ("The Third Imam" p.2). This turning point in Hossein's life is significant. His choice to avoid engagement with politics and civil strife seems to have been a conscientious decision; given the widespread unrest associated with the reign of the first three caliphs, and Hossein's important presence as a descendant of the prophet, it must be true that Hossein was aware of the troubles within the Muslim community at large. His choice to eventually engage in warfare, to take up the sword in physical activism, emphasizes the significance of the situation. ("The Third Imam" p. 2). For Hossein, his father was the legitimate successor to the prophet Muhammad and thus the valid caliph of true Islam. The belief in the valid authority of his father warranted a physical commitment to the defense of Ali's legitimacy.

The conclusion of Hossein's first encounter with warfare, the Battle of Jamal, did not mean resolution between the conflicting parties. In subsequent years several battles were fought rooted in the legitimacy of Ali as caliph and later over more temporal matters, such as political authority and rule. It is believed that Hossein continued to serve alongside his brother as a commander ("The Third Imam" pp. 2-3). Following the death of his father Hossein was declared the third Imam by the Shia' community. However, his leadership was not accepted by all supporters of the prophet and the Umayyads selected their own caliph to lead the people, Muawiyah. In 680 A.D., the son of Muawiyah, Yazid I, became the second Umayyad caliph, following the death of his father. Yazid's relations with the third Imam were brittle from the start.⁹ Any hope of improved relations between the Umayyad community and the third Imam

⁹ Muawiyah waged several battles against Hasan, Hossein and their supportive community. Muawiyah saw Hasan as a threat, given it was widely believed that Hasan was the rightful successor to Ali. Eventually, Muawiyah and Hasan signed a peace contract. The most well known condition of the peace contract was drafted by Hasan. It

were diminished from the very beginning of the rule of Yazid. Against the advice of his father, Yazid's first demand as caliph in regards to the Imam was the Hossein sign an Oath of Allegiance (Winters p.5). The Imam refused. Having endured years of battle and turmoil with his father, and believing that Yazid's reign as caliph was illegitimate, Imam Hossein understood that to sign such an oath would be to turn his back on true Islam. Imam Hossein's refusal to submit to the will of Yazid resulted in his final standoff, the Battle of Karbala ("Imam Husayn and His Martyrdom" p.7).

In the year 680 A.D., Imam Hossein and his followers while traveling to Kufa made camp in a land known as Karbala. It is said that the Imam, upon learning of the name of the location, stated that this place had been named for "torture and pain" ("The Third Imam" p. 10). Shia' Muslims now consider his words to be prophetic. Only two days after setting up camp, Imam Hossein and his followers were met by the governor of Kufa's army, led by a man by the name of Hurr ibn Yazid Riyahi. Hurr ordered Imam Hossein to relocate his camp away from river bank. In the heat of the desert, the command was lethal (Encyclopedia Iranica). As Imam Hossein and his followers fell victim to unquenchable thirst, Yazid sent his military to meet Hurr's soldiers. Yazid's army had grown massive in size, though the Shia' narrative suggests that several of Yazid's men defected in order to serve the Imam, including the commander, Hurr (Encyclopedia Iranica). One by one, the Imam's followers were killed until, in the end, only the relatives of the Imam and Hossein himself were alive.¹⁰ The Imam was the last to die and was

prohibited Muawiyah from naming a successor and instead demanded that the next leader be chosen by the community. Muawiyah did not abide by this contract and named his son Yazid, as his successor. In addition, the contract did not stop Muawiyah from continued attempts to assassinate Hasan. Ultimately, Muawiyah succeeded in killing Hasan through use of poison. In Shia' Islam, Muawiyah and his son Yazid have come to be seen as evil-doers who defy true Islam ("The Third Imam," pp. 2-7).

¹⁰ It is said that prior to the outbreak of battle, the Imam shared his water with Hurr's army. Shias believe that his act of generosity also ensured his death; had the Imam and his followers not displayed kindness toward their enemies, perhaps thirst would not have weakened their bodies and enabled, or at least quickened, their destruction. However,

forced to watch his own family die before him (“The Third Imam” pp. 10-12). The cruelty the Imam endured in the last days of his life offers one explanation for the level of grief felt by believers even today. The pain the Imam endured is not likely to go unnoticed by those who deeply respected him as a leader and representative of the divine. The following is an evaluation of factors contributing to the impact of the Imam’s death on the Iranian Shia’ community.

When considering the impact of Imam Hossein’s death, it is necessary to consider the aforementioned two “Principles of the School” unique to Shia’ Islam. The first, an understanding of the sacred nature of the Imams, sheds light on the significance of Imam Hossein’s death. The understanding that Hossein was one of the few chosen to lead the Shia’ community after the Prophet’s reign demonstrates just how important the Imam was to his followers and why he would remain so even today.

The second “Principle of the School” is that of divine justice. This, too, aids in an understanding of the impact of Imam Hossein’s death on the Iranian identity. The death of Imam Hossein is a tangible example, a moment in history that Shias throughout the ages can pinpoint, of the injustices endured in defense of the faith. Fourteen hundred years after the Imam was killed Iranians continue to mourn his death. The reality of this persistent mourning suggests that there is a piece of the contemporary communal identity which still shares an intimate link with the religious history of the Shia’. Yitzhak Nakash of Princeton University discusses the presence of Imam Hossein’s martyrdom in the communal Shia’ identity. He states:

The traditions...that elaborated on the episodes connected with the battle of Karbala created a religious symbol out of Hossein's suffering and martyrdom. This symbol established powerful

the Imam is praised even today for his charitable character, a sign to believers of his legitimacy (“The Third Imam,” p.10).

and long-lasting moods and motivations among Shi'is, reinforcing their Shi'i communal sense and distinct sectarian identity... (p. 161).

Nakash goes on to describe the martyrdom of Imam Hossein as “a symbol of sacrifice in the struggle (jihad)...for justice and truth against wrongdoing and falsehood (p. 162). With the martyrdom of Imam Hossein as a symbol “of sacrifice for justice,” the link between the earthly injustice and martyrdom can be seen. This connection is not necessarily limited to commemoration of the Imam's death. As Nakash suggests, the incident at Karbala is a symbol which has established “long-lasting moods and motivations” among the Shia' community, therefore implying an applicability to the modern day.

Martyrdom as a Literary Theme

The impact of martyrdom upon Persian literature is not limited to “Siavash.” A return to Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun* illuminates the presence of martyrdom in literature leading up to the 1979 revolution. Determined to stand against the imperialists and protect his community, Yusof continually refuses to meet the demands of the West. In his refusal to promote injustice, Yusof demonstrates a sense of conviction, one which may be considered an individual determination to be just. An example of this can be seen in the following scene: Not long before Yusof's death, Zari weeps over the injustices of life, saying “Why should there be so much misery?” and asking Yusof to stay out of danger. To her pleas, Yusof responds, “Someone must do something” (Daneshvar p. 232). His persistence in the quest for justice makes him an important figure in pre-revolution Iran. It is this same persistence, this same quest for the maintenance of Iranian pride and heritage, which ultimately leads him to his death.

One of the final scenes of the novel is that of the martyrdom of Yusof. On a trip into town, Yusof is assassinated by those he had for so long opposed, the same individuals who

sought to take his land and to give none to the poor of his own community (Daneshvar, p. 249). Following his death, Zari is informed by the authorities that she is not permitted to hold a burial procession (Daneshvar pp.290-293). Nevertheless, Zari proceeds to hold the procession in honor of her husband and in defiance of the authorities. During the procession, mourners gather in large numbers and are eventually forced to disperse by authorities. Zari has no choice but to bury her martyred husband alone, at night, demonstrating that even in death Yusof receives no justice (Daneshvar pp. 293-306).

Daneshvar's choice to have Yusof die as a martyr illuminates the injustices good people are forced to endure, a theme within Persian literature referenced also with the death of Siavash: "Another's good in all he does—he dies..."(Ferdowsi p. 293). Another link between the story of Siavash and *Savushun* can be found in the title of the latter. The name "Savushun," is a transformation of "Siavash" (Encyclopedia Iranica). The parallelism between earlier tales of martyrdom and Daneshvar's contemporary novel suggests an awareness of the role of martyrdom in Iranian cultural history as well as a persistence of the theme of martyrdom in Iranian literary culture.

The concept of martyrdom as a facet of the Iranian communal identity is not only supported through themes of major literary pieces. Each year, on the tenth day of the month of Muharram, Muslims across the globe observe Ashura. For Shia' Muslims, Ashura can be considered a public demonstration of the impact martyrdom has played on the communal religious identity. The following is an exploration of the rituals of Ashura practiced in contemporary Iran.

The Role of Martyrdom in Contemporary Iran

The varying reasons for observance between the Sunni and Shia' Muslims demonstrate distinct differences in theological doctrine. Sunni Muslims celebrate Ashura through a traditional fast. It is a time in which the Sunni community offers gratitude and sacred commemoration for God's rescue of Moses from Egypt, following the tradition of the Jews. It is, in all respects, a day to rejoice and express gratitude for liberation under Allah. The term "celebration" cannot be appropriately applied to the Shia' observance of Ashura (Melton pp. 210-211).

For the Shia' community, Ashura marks the last of ten days set aside for mourning in remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Hossein. The days of mourning, which fall on the first ten days of the month of Moharram, are filled with public displays of grief and a shared understanding of a tragic history and persecution (Nakash p. 164). Reenactments of the battle of Karbala through passion plays, known as Ta'zieh, invoke occasions of communal sorrow. Although the audience undoubtedly understands that the Ta'zieh is simply a reenactment of historic events, their public display of grief illustrates that, while the martyrdom of Imam Hossein took place more than a millennium ago, the agony which these plays invoke in the observant audience is fresh (Nakash p. 165). This persistent agony, according to hadith compiler Mustadrak al-Wasail, was referenced by the prophet Muhammad, as follows:

Surely, there exists in the hearts of the Mu' mineen [the believers], with respect to the martyrdom of Hossein, a heat that never subsides (Mustadrak al-Wasail vol. 10, p. 318).

The concept of a "heat that never subsides" speaks volumes about the impact martyrdom has had on the shaping of the Iranian identity; the memory of the martyrdom lives on, fourteen hundred years after the Imam's death. Iranian sociologist, Ali Shariati, is quoted to have said "Every month is Moharram, every day Ashura, and every place Karbala" (Abrahamian p. 112). In his *History of Iran* Abrahamian calls this saying a "slogan...of fighting for social justice and

political revolution” (p.112). The slogan indicates the level of persistence demonstrated in the call for remembrance of the Imam’s death. It was eventually adopted by the religious, including Ayatollah Khomeini, written on banners and displayed during protests and demonstrations (Khosronejad p.25).

Dedication to this cause of commemoration has not been limited emotional participation. Self-flagellation, while not particularly common, can be seen each year in the Iranian observance of Ashura.¹¹ This practice is almost exclusively made up of male participants who break open their skin in order to demonstrate their willingness to bleed for Imam Hossein. The act also serves as a physical reminder of the pain suffered by the third Imam. Acts of self-flagellation generally occur in public processions, wherein the more reserved beat their chest with their hands, whilst others tear the flesh off their backs with chains and whips (Nakash pp. 174-176). The session is an outward demonstration of pain, mourning and devotion.

The emphasis placed on the martyrdom of Imam Hossein is sustained through continued public commemoration. The performances of Ta’zieh, along with acts of self-flagellation and communal weeping, maintain the memory of the Imam’s martyrdom in the public sphere. Through persistent remembrance of the Imam’s death Ashura has become more than a time of memory and respect; these ten days of mourning are symbols of the impact martyrdom has had upon the shaping of the Iranian communal identity (Nakash p.161).

¹¹ In recent years, acts of self-imposed mutilation have been a more common occurrence in the neighboring nations of Lebanon and Bahrain, as well as within the subcontinent of India. That is not to say that self-flagellation does not occur in Iran as a means of commemorating the death of Imam Hossein, but rather that these practices have been somewhat tamed over the years. In fact, recent restrictions from the government have limited the acts of self-flagellation permissible under the law, claiming that such acts “defame Shia’ Islam,” and “project a negative image of Shi’ism to outside believers” (British Broadcasting Company).

[CHAPTER 4] Justice and Martyrdom in the Messages of Ayatollah Khomeini

Ayatollah Khomeini and Justice

In a comparative analysis of the Iranian Revolution, Keddie observes that by 1978 “... the ayatollah had become, even for many secularists, the symbolic revolutionary leader” (Keddie p. 589). Khomeini’s ability to reach various classes and groups of people, including secularists, allowed the Iranian Revolution to be, according to Charles Kurzman of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the world’s most popular revolution.

[The Iranian Revolution] appears to have been the most popular revolution in history in the sense that at least ten percent of the Iranian population participated, compared to little more than one percent for the 1776 American, 1789 French, or 1918 Russian revolutions (p. 121).

Khomeini’s success as a leader encouraging mobilization can be traced in part to his ability to attract the attention of the lower working class. Mohammad M. Salehi, former faculty of sociology at the National University of Iran, describes the increase in revolutionary fervor within the urban and rural classes through religious affiliation as one of Khomeini’s greatest strides as a revolutionary leader. Speaking of the shift in the revolutionary push from secular intellectuals to the lower class, Salehi states:

The contribution and power of the small, but highly influential, new middle class was becoming insignificant compared to the urban class and the rural people...[The demands of the middle class secularists] were overstepped by an Islamic fundamentalist revitalization movement that attracted millions...to the realm of revolutionary politics (pp. 2-3).

The remainder of this paper will explore Khomeini’s rise to the status of “the symbolic revolutionary leader,” utilizing the works of the Ayatollah, and in particular his speeches, as evidences (Keddie p. 589). The analysis will be focused on Khomeini’s use of justice and martyrdom, previously explored elements of the Iranian communal identity, as fuels for

mobilization. The ability of the use of justice and martyrdom to inspire the Iranian people to mobilize will also be explored.

Khomeini began to publish political critiques of the Pahlavis as early as the year 1921, though his denouncements of the monarchy became more frequent with the outbreak of the Second World War (Bhagat p. 33). In the sixties, his speeches began to attract substantial audiences. Following Reza Shah Pahlavi's introduction of a series of economic, social and political reforms known as the "The White Revolution" in 1963, Khomeini "made violent speeches against the Shah before 100,000 people ... in Qum" (Bhagat p. 33). His speeches ignited demonstrations across Iran from audiences who related to his message. Ultimately, these demonstrations led to the massacre of a "number of students from Fayziya Madrasa" in late March of 1963 wherein "several students were killed and dozens arrested" (Khomeini p. 16). This massacre marks what Khomeini's supporters considered to be the first of the revolution. Forty days later, Khomeini publically addressed this massacre, making reference to injustices suffered in defense of the faith. The following is a portion of the Ayatollah's declaration:

Our crime was defending the laws of Islam and the independence of Iran. It is because of our defense of Islam that we have been humiliated and brought to expect imprisonment, torture and execution. (p. 174)

Fifteen years before the outbreak of revolution, Khomeini spoke openly about the threat of the monarchy against Islam, as evident in his declarations above. The Ayatollah's belief and claim that Islam is threatened by the Shah mirrors the long-standing religious narrative of the battle between good and evil. Viewed through this narrative, Islam can be considered truth and therefore the icon of complete righteousness. On the other hand, the Shah, according to the Ayatollah, is the opponent of truth. Khomeini established his view of the Shah as an enemy of the faith through his naming of the Shah "as the evil Yazid" (Bhagat p.37).

On February 19, 1978, over a decade after the Fayziya Madrasa massacre, Khomeini delivered a speech in memory of those killed. In the speech, Khomeini makes reference to the sufferings of the Iranian people:

We are faced with so many difficulties; I cannot possibly tell you all of them. God knows, the problems that are referred to me by the people! They tell me, for example, ‘We want to build a water-storage tank at such-and-such place, because there the people have no water.’ Now if people don’t have water, do they have electricity? Do they have paved roads? They have nothing!’ (Khomeini p. 223)

With the use of an inclusive subject, “we,” Khomeini allows himself to share in the pain of the people; he becomes one with the masses, uniting Iranians together with a shared ambition to end the injustice and suffering brought about by the reign of the Shah. Khomeini’s efforts to unite the masses against the western imperialists were not limited to the Iranian public. Many of his speeches were directed at broader audiences. For example, on February 6, 1971, Khomeini delivered a speech “to the Muslims of the world gathered together on....the pilgrimage to Mecca” (Khomeini p. 195). During this speech, Khomeini expresses a duty among Muslims for the exchange of knowledge in order to gain understanding of the injustices suffered by believers at the hands of imperialists:

The [Muslims] of each country should...present a report concerning their own state to the Muslims of the world, and thus all will come to know what their Muslim brothers are suffering at the hands of imperialists (p. 197).

There is in this expression of duty a call for communal understanding among believers of the injustices suffered by Muslims across the world. In response to this self-declared duty, Khomeini informs his audience of the actions of the Shah and his regime. He states:

Invoking Islam and pretending to be Muslims, they strive to annihilate Islam, and they abolish and obliterate the sacred commands of the Qur’an one after the other...I extend my hand to all people of Islam....to break the chains of captivity” (pp. 197-198).

Again, by asserting that the Shah and his administration “pretend to be Muslims,” Khomeini draws a line between what he defines as true Islam and what the Iranian government represents. In this way, Khomeini separates the Iranian Shia’ communities from the Shah, placing the Shah as the enemy of the faith, and thus by extension, the public (Khomeini p. 177).

The years approaching revolution were spent in exile for the Ayatollah. For more than a decade Khomeini lived outside of Iran, though he continued to denounce the Shah and his western policies from abroad (Bhagat, pp. 33-37). As tensions between the Iranian people and the Shah increased, Khomeini’s influence spread drastically. Followers began to record Khomeini’s lectures which were subsequently smuggled into Iran by the thousands. Even when abroad, Khomeini spoke of the creation of a new form of government in Iran. He incorporated the quest for justice into messages revolving around the formation of an Islamic Republic. He began to refer to the transformation from secular to religious rule as the creation of a “government of justice,” as seen below:

In order to attain the unity and freedom of the Muslim peoples, we must overthrow the oppressive governments installed by the imperialists and bring into existence an Islamic government of justice that will be in the service of the people (Khomeini p.49).

As the above declaration makes clear, the Ayatollah calls for revolution did not end with the dismissal of the westernized regime of the Shah. Rather, Khomeini rallied for the subsequent establishment of an Islamic Republic, a system he believed would reign in long awaited years of legitimate rule in line with Islamic principles and teachings. Justice was therefore not only a driving force for the overthrow of the monarchy but also a motivating factor in the establishment and acceptance of an entirely new form of government. Salehi describes this approach to political change as follows:

In Shiite ideology, revolution does not mean the restructuring of a new form of society, but an uprising of the believers to correct the wrong, to put things back on the right track, to reestablish the rule provided by God descended through his prophet (p.49).

In the case of Iran, it was not enough for the Shah to be removed from power. The rise of a legitimate authority was a necessary step toward the obtainment of temporal justice, and for Khomeini, legitimacy in government could only exist within the confines of an Islamic system (Khomeini p. 49).

In asserting that justice could only be reached through the formation of a legitimate Islamic Republic under the leadership of an Imam, Khomeini reaches one of the most intimate corners of a person's being: the spiritual makeup of an individual. By limiting individuals the right to religious expression, the Shah did not only claim the religious freedoms of Iranians but also their human dignity. Simin Daneshvar, makes reference to her husband's return to religion prior to the revolution as a means of reclaiming his dignity. She states:

If he turned to religion, it was the result of his wisdom and insight because he had previously experimented with Marxism, socialism and to some extent, existentialism, and his relative return to religion and the Hidden Imam was toward deliverance from the evil of imperialism and toward the preservation of national identity, a way toward human dignity, compassion, justice, reason, and virtue (qtd. by Mirsepassi-Ashtia p.61)

In turning to religion, Daneshvar suggests that her husband also turns toward dignity and justice. Daneshvar's reference to a return to religion as a "way toward human dignity" supports a connection between her husband's religious inclinations and his self-respect. If, as Daneshvar implies, religion can be seen as a way toward human dignity then the Shah's desecration of the sacred could logically be said to have a negative effect upon one's dignity. Additionally noteworthy is Daneshvar's suggestion that a return to religion served to "preserve the national identity," thereby suggesting that Shia' Islam is linked to the Iranian identity. The implication of

this connection reinforces a communal understanding of the impact of Shia' theology on the Iranian identity.

Through shared understanding of justice, based in large part on a common Shia' identity, Khomeini was able to relate to his audience. His speeches encouraged Muslims from around the world to consider the injustices brought about by westernization. The actions of the Shah were discussed as a means of circulating his injustice, and according to Khomeini, illegitimate rule (Khomeini p. 49). Utilizing the inclusive subject, the Ayatollah included himself as a victim when speaking of the Shah's policies; his self-inclusion allowed him to speak as part of a community seeking justice. The theme of justice, and the use of examples of injustice, allow Khomeini to remind his audiences of the sufferings the Iranian people, and Shia' population at large, have been made to endure. A point in history which Khomeini returns frequently to as a reminder of these sufferings is the Battle of Karbala.

Ayatollah Khomeini and Martyrdom

Alongside justice, martyrdom was a common theme in the messages of Ayatollah Khomeini. During the years leading up to the revolution, Khomeini refers frequently and specifically to the martyrdom of Imam Hossein. In his speech commemorating the martyrs at Qum in 1963, Khomeini calls Imam Hossein, "the great one," asserting that it is "for the sake of [Imam Hossein]" that the Iranian people have suffered (Khomeini p. 174). That same year, Khomeini gave a speech on Ashura. In this speech, he compares the actions of Yazid in the massacre at Karbala to the actions of the Shah's regime. He states:

Sometimes when I recall the events of Ashura, a question occurs to me: If the...regime of Yazid...wished to make war against Hossein, why did they commit such savage and innocent crimes against the defenseless women and innocent children? It seems to me that the Umayyads had a far more basic aim: they were opposed to the very existence of the Prophet....A similar question occurs to me now. If the tyrannical regime of Iran simply wished to...oppose the ulama,

what business did it have tearing the Qur'an to shreds on the day it attacked Fayziya Madrasa? We come to the conclusion that this regime also has a more basic aim: they are fundamentally opposed to Islam itself and the existence of the religious class...they do not wish any of us to exist" (p. 177).

In these words, Khomeini's comparison between the Battle at Karbala and the actions of the Shah's regime is clear. The historic battle is not only commemorated by Khomeini but is used to parallel the actions of the Iranian government. For Shia' Muslims, the narrative is a core component of Shia' theology, as previously discussed, and therefore well-known in amongst believers. The Battle of Karbala results in the martyrdom of the Imam, his family and his followers. With this comparison, Khomeini declares that the government seeks, as did Yazid, to dispose of the believers—"they do not wish any of us to exist" (p. 177).

As the revolution drew near, references to martyrdom evolved into calls *for* martyrdom. A few short months before the revolution, Khomeini called directly for the sacrifice of revolutionary advocates, saying "Our movement is but a fragile plant. It needs the blood of martyrs to help it grow into a towering tree" (qtd. by Sciolino p.174). The sentiment in this statement is clear: Khomeini believed bloodshed would be a necessary sacrifice and proclaimed as much to his audience.¹² His references to the death of Imam Hossein, as seen through his speeches, evolved from commemoration of the martyrs, to the creation of parallelisms, to, ultimately, calls for his audience to give their own lives for the cause.

The declarations of Khomeini suggest that the Ayatollah recognized the significance of martyrdom within the communal Iranian identity, specifically in regards to the Twelver Shia'

¹² Khomeini's call for martyrdom and praise of those who died in such a manner did not end with the ousting of the Shah. During the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, Khomeini publically praised those who died as martyrs. He is recorded as having said, "Our leader is that young boy of 12 who threw himself with a grenade under the enemy's tank, destroying it and drinking the sweet draft of martyrdom." (Gruber p. 31).

community. In her memoir on Iran, Elaine Sciolino describes the Ayatollah's understanding of the importance of martyrdom.

...martyrdom has deep roots in Iran's Shiite culture, and Khomeini was a master at manipulating the homegrown strain of martyrdom and its lust for sacrifice. During a sermon...for Muharram in 1963, Khomeini likened the oppression of the Iranian people under the Shah's monarchy to Hosein's martyrdom. When Khomeini was arrested...men and women wrapped themselves in white funeral shrouds as symbols of their readiness to die for him...The first thing Khomeini did [when he returned to Iran in 1979] was to fly by helicopter [to the graveyard]...to mourn the victims of Black Friday. (Sciolino pp.174-175).

After having been exiled for years, the Ayatollah's return to Iran was marked by a publicized and immediate visit to the graveyard of the martyrs. This act suggests an understanding of Khomeini's part of the importance of the martyrs. Through the action of visiting the martyrs, Khomeini placed himself on the side of the mourners, demonstrating a shared understanding and communal grievance for the consequences of injustice.

Conclusion

Justice and martyrdom have entered the Iranian identity through a variety of avenues. In Zoroastrian theology the narrative of the battle between good and evil is developed. This narrative can be seen through Shia' theology as well and is apparent in the Shia' understanding of divine justice. As previously discussed, the quest for justice is both an individual and communal task. Through the doctrine of the lesser Jihad an individual role in this quest becomes clear. Following the split between the Sunnis and Shias, the later sect distinguished themselves through the historical narrative of the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hossein. The massacre of the sacred Imam during this battle stand as a tangible reminder to Shia' Muslims of the injustices suffered by believers.

The literature surrounding the revolution also serves to illuminate the prevalence of justice in the Persian literary narrative and thus communal identity. Ayatollah Khomeini utilized justice as a goal for revolution, largely through expression of shared understanding. Through the establishment of an Islamic Republic, Khomeini promised his audience that a new era would begin. This era would occur under the existence of an Islamic Republic, the only government Khomeini claimed could be legitimate. The early Shia' narrative provided Khomeini with the ability to label the Shah as an enemy of Islam, which he did, as discussed, by drawing parallels between the martyrs of Imam Hossein and Reza Shah's government. In this way, Khomeini aided in the revitalization of a religious awakening. The Shah no longer was seen as a ruler simply unsuited for the post; through Khomeini's influence he became an illegitimate authority who suppressed the people, and more importantly, suppressed Islam. Reza Pahlavi became a man who stood to diminish everything for which Imam Hossein had died. Khomeini's naming of the Shah as an enemy of Islam was effective and can be seen in his ability to mobilize the masses.

As Salehi states, it was the religious lower class which eventually transformed ideas of change to action of rebellion—a class which previously had strayed away from political engagement (p.2).

The concepts of injustice and consequential martyrdom awoke in the peoples' consciousness a newfound understanding of each reality, as is evident in themes from major literary works of the time. Eventually, Khomeini's most faithful audience would be called to shed their blood if needed in the battle between good and evil. Khomeini's references to martyrdom became calls to action, resulting in a continuation of the tradition of praise and remembrance for those who had given their lives in defense of the faith.

For thirty-four years, the government created as a result of the Iranian revolution has withstood the test of time. As tensions with the Shah rose, masses came together, experiencing and holding to a shared identity. To this day, that identity can still be seen, though without the consistency of demonstrations and protests it exists in a quieter, less obvious manner. The ties which brought the masses together under Khomeini's calls for action have, like the revolution, withstood the test of time. Justice continues to play a pivotal role in the Iranian identity just as the martyrdom of Imam Hossein is commemorated year after year on Ashura. And in the vast graveyards of the martyrs red tulips still sprout from the earth, a symbol of those who have fallen for the faith.

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